

## Subjective outcome evaluation of a Service Learning subject in a Chinese context

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### ABSTRACT

The present study reports the evaluation findings based on 37 students from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University who enrolled in a service learning subject entitled 'Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development' in the 2012/13 academic year. The Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) was used to gauge the views of students on the subject and the teaching performance of the staff. Both qualitative and quantitative results showed that students generally had positive perceptions of the subject and teachers, with many participants regarding the subject as helpful to them as a future professional, a citizen in the Hong Kong society and for their personal growth. Overall, the study confirms the effectiveness of the service learning subject in Hong Kong.

Key Words: Service learning subject, student feedback, citizenship, personal growth, Chinese context

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the purpose of the higher education is to advance university students' professional competence and assist them to search career with prospects. This traditional emphasis on "professional nurturance" has invited debate regarding the mission of a university. Some colleagues argued that it is important for universities to educate students to be responsible citizens rather than solely for their careers (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Chupp & Joseph, 2012; Ngai, 2006). Rodin (2007), the former President of the University of Pennsylvania, asserted the importance of university-community relationship and proposed to reorient the social responsibility of a university that "the university can plan a lead[ing] role in urban transformation by changing its perspectives and making a commitment to alter its ways of interacting and transacting" (p.118).

With valuable resources and the traditional mission of addressing the needs of the community, universities are particularly well-suited for the development of service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). By emphasizing the importance of serving the community, service learning can enrich students' learning and re-connect their academic learning to the needs of the real world. Service learning is thus seen as an important mechanism in the universities to bridge the gap between universities and the community. And service learning has become an increasingly popular pedagogy, with the focus of "experiential learning", to educate university students about life. Professional schools of the universities have also provided experiential learning experiences, such as internships and clinical or pre-service practices. Some scholars, however, question the learning objectives of these opportunities that these experiences may not explicitly

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convey the importance of university students' civic responsibility and service to the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Service learning could help convey such messages by putting the students in a more engaged and active roles beyond the classroom settings. In addition, the vast body of scientific literature in the Western and Asian contexts generally show that service learning in the higher education has benefitted the students in various ways such as cultivating students' civic responsibility, helping students become more compassionate and empathic, have greater understanding in solving social problems, have greater efficacy to make the world better, and promoting students' cognitive, attitudinal, moral, social and personal development (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 1996; Mitchell, 2008; Ngai, 2006).

Given that the service learning has become a very popular pedagogical approach in higher educational settings and has been a practice for more than two decades, little attention has been paid to investigating the effectiveness of service learning subjects in local and western culture (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Ngai, 2006; Warren, 2012). Some evidence shows that service learning has modest positive effects on students' psychological, social and cognitive development (Batchelder & Root, 1994). However, an important question left unanswered is whether the pedagogy used in service learning increases students' learning outcomes. Warren (2012) attempted to answer this question by conducting a meta-analysis of 14 studies in the United States. The analysis suggested that service learning has positive influence on student learning outcomes. As the studies under review were conducted in Western contexts, it would be interesting to examine if similar findings were obtained in the Chinese context.

As a long-established and widely-known university focusing on applied knowledge, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) has created numerous experiential learning opportunities for the students, including world-wide internships, exchange programs, field experiences and practicum to advance their professional knowledge and skills. Under the new 4-year undergraduate curriculum commencing in 2012/13 school year, students are required to complete at least one 3-credit subject on Service Learning to nurture the PolyU students' civic responsibility and the attitude "to learn to serve". This move not only offers the students opportunities for increasing their participation in community service and enhancing the awareness of applying their learnt professional knowledge to cater the needs of the community and society, but it also nurtures students' leading role of making commitment to the society or the country.

To contribute to the scientific literature on the effectiveness of service learning, a service learning subject entitled "Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development" in PolyU was examined in this study. The subject was one of the pilot Service Learning subjects offered in the academic year 2012-2013 from semesters two to three (summer semester). Before being accepted for the Subject, students were required to attend an interview. Out of more than 150 applicants, 40 students were selected and successfully registered for the subject. The subject attempted to introduce different psychosocial perspectives in understanding children and adolescent development as well as the needs and challenges of children and adolescents living in disadvantaged circumstances, to cultivate the positive values and strengths orientation among students, to nurture students' sense of social responsibility and social awareness and to promote prosocial behaviors. The subject was an offshore one and the service took place in East China.

The service recipients were migrant children in the East China area and a 5-day summer camp was held. Before the service-learning trip, three lectures and seven workshops (each lecture and workshop lasted for three hours) were organized during the above-mentioned period. During the workshops, practical skills in dealing with the children and adolescents were introduced and students would be in groups to devise feasible service proposals to best cater the needs of the service participants. After the

service-learning trip, students were required to do group presentations and write reflective journals to consolidate their insights of the service and the learning process.

Student feedback questionnaires are administered in many universities worldwide and constitute the most widely used form of teaching evaluation in higher education (Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002). It serves as a means for quality management in higher education and helps students reflect upon their learning (Rowley, 2003). As more and more educational institutions in higher education are providing service learning subjects, there is a need to evaluate and analyze the outcomes and impacts of these subjects on student learning and teachers' professional development (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996). According to Honnet and Poulsen (1989), "because people are often changed by the service and learning experience, effective programs must build in opportunities for continuous feedback about the changing service needs and growing service skills of those involved. Ideally, participation in the service partnership affects personal development in areas such as intellect, ethics, cross-cultural understanding, empathy, leadership, and citizenship" (p. 10). As such, it is clear that there is a need to conduct systematic evaluation to assess students' feedback on their service learning experience. However, there is a "scarcity of replicable qualitative and quantitative research on the effects of service learning on student learning and development, the communities in which they serve, or on the educational institutions" (Giles, Honnet, & Migliore, 1991, p.2). Therefore, this paper aims to evaluate the impact of the subject "Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development" on student development.

## 2. METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

In the 2012-2013 academic year, a total of 40 students from different disciplines enrolled for the subject. In order to gauge students' perceptions of learning experience in the subject and the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, all students enrolled in the subject were invited via electronic mail to complete a Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) online upon completion of the subject. A total of 37 questionnaires were received. The response rate was 92.5%. The SFQ consisted of 10 items, assessing students' perceptions of their learning experience (5-items) and the achievement of learning outcomes (5-items). Respondents were invited to rate their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### INSTRUMENTS

Upon completion of each subject, a Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) was administered to collect the students' views and perceptions of the subject. Broadly speaking, there are two major parts of the SFQ, which are the students' perceptions of the subject and the students' perceptions of the teaching staff. Categories for each part are listed as follows:

#### *(A) About the subject*

- Students' learning experience in this subject (5 items)
- Feedback on the achievement of general learning objectives/outcomes (5 items)
- Extra questions added optionally by the subject, such as meeting the specific learning outcomes of the subject (5 items)
- Two open-ended questions, such as the most useful aspects in the students' learning and suggestions on the improvement of the subject.

*(B) About the staff*

- Teaching quality of the staff (7 items)
- Use of English as the medium of instruction (1 item)
- Extra questions added optionally by the subject, such as the teaching skills of the staff and the interactions between the staff and students (5 items)

Two open-ended questions, such as what were the most helpful aspects of the teaching staff and suggestions for improving the teaching.

### 3. RESULTS

Quantitative findings based on the closed-ended questions are presented in the present paper. Several observations are highlighted from the findings based on the descriptive statistical analyses using percentage data. Findings revealed that students' perceptions of the subject were highly positive. Overall speaking, in terms of learning experience, students reported that they had a clear understanding of what they were expected to learn from the subject (97.3%), and that the teaching and learning activities have helped them to achieve the learning outcomes (97.3%). With particular reference to the achievement of learning outcomes, students reported that they were able to link the service learning activities and experiences with the academic content of the subject (97.3%), and that they learned to apply the knowledge and skills acquired at the university to deal with the complex issues in the service setting (97.3%). Most importantly, this subject achieved the overarching goal of service learning as students reported that the subject enabled them to develop a strong sense of civic responsibility (100%), reflect on their roles and responsibilities both as a professional and a responsible citizen (97.3%), and develop a sense of empathy towards people in need (97.3%). Lastly, students reported that the subject had enriched their overall development (100%) and the subject had promoted their understanding of the needs of the service participants (100%).

**Table 1 Summary of students' perceptions toward the subject (N = 37)**

		3 No Strong Views		4 Agree		5 Strongly Agree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Learning experience							
1.	I have a clear understanding of what I am expected to learn from this subject.	1	2.7	24	64.9	12	32.4
2.	The teaching and learning activities (e.g. lectures, discussions, case studies, projects, etc.) have helped me to achieve the subject learning outcomes.	1	2.7	23	62.2	13	35.1
3.	The assessments require me to demonstrate my knowledge, skills and understanding of the subject.	1	2.7	23	62.2	13	35.1
4.	I understand the criteria according to which I will be graded.	3	8.1	23	62.2	11	29.7
Achievement of learning outcomes							
5.	I can link the service learning activities and experiences with the academic content of the subject.	1	2.7	25	67.6	11	29.7
6.	I have learned to apply the knowledge and skills I acquire at university to deal with complex	1	2.7	20	54.1	16	43.2

issues in the service setting.

7.	This subject has enabled me to reflect on my role and responsibilities both as a professional and as a responsible citizen.	1	2.7	19	51.4	17	45.9
8.	I have felt more empathy towards people in need as a result of studying this subject.	1	2.7	17	45.9	19	51.4
9.	I have developed a stronger sense of civic responsibility.	0	0.0	23	62.2	14	37.8
Achievement of Specific Learning Objectives							
10.	This subject has promoted my understanding of the needs of the service participants.	0	0.0	23	62.2	14	37.8
11.	This subject has promoted my competencies, including self-confidence, problem solving ability, decision-making capability, and interpersonal skills.	1	0.0	20	54.1	16	43.2
12.	The subject has promoted my compassion about those who are in need.	2	5.4	15	40.5	20	54.1
13.	This subject has enriched my overall development.	0	0.0	19	51.4	18	48.6

*Note.* All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = no strong views, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. All respondents reported ratings of 3 or above.

In order to examine the relationship between the learning experience and the achievement of learning outcomes, correlation analyses were performed. Reliability analysis showed that the SFQ was internally consistent (Table 2): 4 items related to learning experience ( $\alpha = .91$ ), 5 items related to achievement of learning outcomes ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and 4 items related to achievement of desired learning objectives ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Results of correlation analyses showed that the achievement of learning outcomes ( $r = .82$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and achievement of specific learning objectives ( $r = .77$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were strongly associated with learning experience (Table 2).

**Table 2 Mean, SDs, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , and Correlation coefficients among the variables ( $N = 37$ )**

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3
1. Learning experience (4 items; $\alpha = .91$ )	4.29 (.48)	-		
2. Achievement of Learning Outcomes (5 items; $\alpha = .90$ )	4.39 (.45)	.82**	-	
3. Achievement of Specific Learning Objectives (4 items; $\alpha = .88$ )	4.44 (.46)	.77**	.51*	-
Overall (13 items; $\alpha = .94$ )	4.38 (.42)	.87**	.97**	.84**

*Note.* \*\*  $p < .001$ , \*  $p < .01$

In addition to quantitative feedback, students were also invited to provide qualitative comments on what aspects of the subject were most useful to their learning, and how the subject could be improved to help them learn better. For the "subject" part, the students reported that the knowledge and practical skills learnt during the course and the experience of providing a service were viewed as the "most useful". One comment stated explicitly that the team (the small group arranged during the class) is "one of the greatest harvest in this opportunity". About the improvements of the subject, students perceived that the workload (lectures, workshops and assessments) was a concern. Yet interestingly, some students suggested having more workshops before or during the

service for the relevant open-ended question. For the "staff" part, the main aspects in which the staff members were found helpful were providing timely feedback; using several different teaching methods (especially in communicating with children and adolescents) and the staff members' caring attitudes. About the improvement of the teaching staff, there are scarce comments in this open-ended question.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Although the present investigation is based on the data collected in a single Service Learning subject, the results have shed some light on the effectiveness of the service learning pedagogy and have helped generate some insights into the learning and teaching process of the service learning subject. This investigation provided a useful case study to illustrate how the SFQ can possibly help understand a newly developed pedagogical service learning subject in the local context.

The findings of the present investigation are highly positive which strongly suggest that service learning is an appropriate pedagogical approach in helping students reflect on their growth in the experience of service learning. The highly positive feedback also suggests that the subject was helpful to nurture students' civic responsibility and their overall development. The findings are consistent with the previous studies (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Mitchell, 2008; Warren, 2012) that the service learning was beneficial to students. The benefits of the teaching process, though not directly from the teachers, were also demonstrated by students' feedback on teachers' caring attitudes and professional teaching skills.

Eyler and Giles (1999) suggested that successful and effective service learning experiences should satisfy the following four criteria: (1) personal and interpersonal development; (2) understanding and applying knowledge learnt in class; (3) perspective transformation, and (4) developed sense of citizenship. The present investigation showed that the subject has provided students with such service learning experiences. Upon completion of the Subject, the students stated that the subject has enriched their overall development and has promoted different psychosocial competencies such as reinforcing their self-confidence, enhancing their problem-solving abilities and interpersonal skills. The qualitative feedback of perceiving the team formed as "harvest" could serve as an example of showing the "interpersonal development" of the students. In addition, the students mentioned in the SFQ that the course readings and learning are closely related to the specific community (the migrant children) they are serving which may help maximize the impact on students and service participants (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). Besides the knowledge acquisition and personal development, students have felt more empathy and promoted their compassion towards people in need as a result of studying this subject. The students are serving migrant children in Shanghai and this exposure provides them opportunities to interact with different cultural groups. This exposure thus helps students develop the cultural sensitivity and empathic understanding of the migrant children (Flannery & Ward, 1999). This "perspective transformation" assures the importance of having students experienced in service learning subjects. Through the learning process, the students learn can become aware of the need of the community by learning about the "authentic relationships" and through the interdependence between themselves, the service participants and the serving community.

There is an interesting observation in the present investigation. It is interesting to note that the present investigation on this general university requirement service-learning subject received a highly positive feedback and that the subject contents and service may not directly relate to the disciplines of the registered students. The academic context, referring to the disciplinary-related field, of the service learning is valued in numerous literature (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Furco, 1996).

Students enrolling the disciplinary-related service learning subject might help them gain further understanding of the related disciplinary knowledge and have a broader appreciation of the discipline (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). This view might also apply to the students taking service learning subjects at PolyU. The disciplinary-oriented service learning subjects provide students with context-based knowledge and practice opportunities in the related field. This connection between theory and practice generates a higher level of motivation for students to devote the necessary time and efforts to learn the relevant knowledge and deliver the required service. However, the general service learning subjects, in addition to providing them with a professional training in their own discipline, could offer students another perspective on the needs of the service recipients and the issues of the community. In addition, the involvement in the service of other academic contexts helps broaden the students' appreciation of their own disciplines by more reflections and understanding of the community needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Despite the positive findings of the study, the limitations of the study should be realized. Although using SFQ is a cost- and manpower-efficient means to understand students' learning outcomes in specific subjects, some scholars still have doubt about whether the Likert-type standardized evaluations are adequate to provide detailed information that can help researchers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the subjects and lead to relevant revisions of each individual subjects (Brew, 2008). In fact, multi-layered meanings could be yielded by combining the qualitative data with the quantitative data obtained.

In addition, Kember, Leung and Kwan (2002) doubted that performing SFQ is only an act of "formality" without improving overall quality of teaching. The performance of the lecturers "is more or less the same [after the evaluation]...and could not see any effects of the evaluation" (Kember et al., 2002, p. 416). It might be possible that inadequate attention has been paid to utilizing the SFQ data effectively to identify areas for improvement in teaching. However, the depth of the data analyses could be deepened by incorporating teachers' self-evaluations of their teaching (Richardson, 2005). More data from the teachers, for example by having the teachers fill in the subjective outcome evaluation (Shek, Siu & Lee, 2007) or individual interviews, could help deepen the understanding of the pedagogical arrangements administered and the personal growth of the teachers in the process of teaching and learning the service learning subjects.

The Education Reform has been taken place in Hong Kong for more than a decade. The revolutionary changes in turning the education system to 3-3-4 (3 years of junior- and 3-year of senior-schooling, and 4-year university), and the offer of "Other Learning Experiences" (including moral and civic education; community services; career-related experiences; aesthetic development and physical education) have posed great challenges to the students and teachers yet stimulated the field to investigate the impact of the changes on students. In one of the arenas of the "Other Learning Experiences" (OLE), the experience of "community service" in their secondary schooling has some "connection" with the experience in service learning in the university setting. It would be interesting to know how the students "evolve" from the voluntary-service-oriented to a both cognitively- and psychologically-demanded (planning of the service and developing "authentic relationships") experiences to see how their perspectives have been transformed.

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